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SUBJECT: CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLE (COPE) STRUGGLES IN KWAZULU NATAL

REF: A) DURBAN 66; B) PRETORIA 2407

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(U) This cable is Sensitive But Unclassified (SBU). Not for Internet Distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Congress of the People (COPE) is finding it difficult to establish a presence in KwaZulu Natal (KZN). Only a few lower-ranking ANC members have publicly declared their support for COPE in KZN, and support from senior ANC leaders is so far elusive. Worse still, an apparent coup for COPE from an endorsement by a revered ANC leader turned to an embarrassment, when the leader subsequently denied the endorsement. Even those senior ANC members in KZN faithful to former President Mbeki have so far been reluctant to shift allegiance to COPE, due largely to party unity in the province, under the leadership of ANC Provincial Chairman Dr. Zweli Mkhize. The situation might change, however, with the finalizing of ANC lists for provincial parliament seats. End summary.

Appeal Limited

¶2. (SBU) So far in KwaZulu Natal province, only lower-level ANC officials have left the ANC to join the new COPE party led by former National Chairman of the ANC Mosiuoa Lekota and former Premier of Gauteng Mbazima Shilowa. These include Phillip Mhlongo and Nhlanhla Buthelezi, who were staunch Thabo Mbeki supporters before the December 2007 ANC National Conference in Polokwane. No senior ANC leader in the province has declared support for the new party. The ANC Provincial Secretary Senzo Mchunu is reported to have declared KZN a "no-go area" for the new party.

Intimidation Tactics

¶3. (SBU) Mosiuoa Lekota visited the province in mid-November, and was met by angry ANC members who tried to block his meetings with his supporters in Chatsworth and Verulam. The situation in Verulam became violent as ANC members aggressively disrupted the COPE meeting and intimidated attendees, and police had to intervene to calm the situation. Another planned appearance by Lekota at the University of KwaZulu Natal was called off at short notice, and COPE accused the ANC of putting pressure on the university to cancel the meeting. Comment: Space for free political activity by ANC members in KZN is not as open as it is in other provinces. Political intolerance and violence continues to be a factor in KZN, and the ANC seem to be allowing its members to intimidate COPE members and supporters in the province by disrupting their meetings. ANC local leaders such as councilors were reportedly involved in the disruptions of COPE meetings, although the ANC officially denied involvement. End comment.

Failed "Coup"

14. (SBU) Lekota met on November 13 with Professor Fatima Meer, a stalwart of the ANC and a personal friend of Nelson Mandela. After the meeting, Lekota told the press that Meer had endorsed the new party. This could have been a major coup for COPE in Jacob Zuma's home province. However, the ANC acted quickly and Prof. Meer on November 16 denied Lekota's claim and issued a statement -- uncharacteristically, read to the press by her brother rather than by Meer herself -- denying that she had joined COPE and recommitting herself to the ANC. This put Lekota in the awkward position of having to apologize for claiming that Prof. Meer had endorsed COPE. For COPE, this was a serious set-back and an embarrassment.

Comment

15. (SBU) COPE's failure to establish a presence in KZN, despite strong efforts, is due mainly the ANC's unified support for Zuma in the province. ANC Provincial Chairman Dr. Zweli Mkhize is an effective leader who has worked hard to unify the party since taking over leadership from Premier Sibusiso Ndebele. He is seen as a voice of reason and conciliation in a province where tempers are high amid talk of the new break-away party and promises from some pro-Zuma senior ANC leaders to make KZN a "no-go area" for COPE. Strong cooperation between Dr. Mkhize and Premier Ndebele (who is a known Mbeki supporter) is another factor that has kept the ANC united and is making it difficult for COPE to make inroads in the province, among senior leaders and rank-and-file members.

16. (SBU) Minister of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs and former provincial spokesperson of the ANC, Mr. Mtholephi Mthimkhulu, and former Deputy Provincial Secretary and current chairman of the portfolio committee on local government and traditional affairs Mr. Mbuso Kubheka, both strong Mbeki supporters pre-Polokwane, have been expected to resign from the ANC to join COPE, according to Consulate contacts, but they have so far not made a move. This might change as the ANC list

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process starts. Those provincial ANC leaders in the province who supported Mbeki at the Polokwane conference are likely to be excluded from the list of members of parliament of provincial legislatures for 2009 general elections, and at that point may decide to shift their allegiance to COPE.

DERDERIAN